



THE UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

DEPARTMENT OF BIOLOGY

ROCHESTER, NEW YORK 14627

April 7, 1972

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Dear Tim:

I talked today to Don Wise about erosion in dry environments, specifically the spectacular rock carvings which one can see in such areas as Antarctica. Many of these, as you know, look extremely suggestive if one happens to have a biologically prejudiced imagination. Don suggested that in a water limited environment, such as Mars, we may find similar formations.

Don made an extremely interesting suggestion, namely the compilation of an atlas of photographs of rock formations which suggest either the action of living organisms or the presence of fossil deposits, but which are known to be something of nonbiological origin. I have some detailed photographs of sandstone cliffs which look like piles of worms or fossilized brown algae but, according to our geology department, are something entirely different. I am sure that you have seen similar material and you may have photographs of that type. The availability of such an atlas might serve as a cautionary measure which might prevent people from jumping to conclusions when images are returned from the surface of Mars. The demonstration that even on earth we have all kinds of formations which appear to be the product of biological activity but are not might be a useful documentation which may at least minimize false alarms.

You may remember how it had been suggested in the newspapers that one of the rocks shown on the surface of the moon looked like a brontosaurus skull. The danger of people going off half-cocked is of course much greater in the course of Martian exploration.

If you think that such a compilation may serve a useful purpose then we might try to start assembling material for such an atlas now.

Sincerely,

Wolf V. Vishniac

WVV:ml

copy: Dr. Gerald Soffen
Dr. Carl Sagan
Dr. Joshua Lederberg✓